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ABSTRACT

Recognizing that experienced writers often develop elaborate patterns for carrying out the various stages of their work, a study questioned a variety of student and professional writers about their writing rituals with the purpose of identifying pedagogical strategies that will facilitate student writing. Subjects, 109 developmental writing students, 42 freshman composition students, 11 honors freshmen, 44 students of English as a second language, five graduate students, 4 college professors, and one professional novelist, answered an information survey. Questionnaires and personal interviews indicated that developmental students have writing rituals, but that they are often unproductive ones. One student, for example, reported that she habitually does her writing in a place where she is subject to interruptions. In addition, although she engages in several procrastination activities, she has failed to devise productive rituals that will help her find ideas and communicate them. Freshman composition students are more likely to use writing warm-ups, turn to stress relieving activities, and in general, more consciously control the process of writing. Honors students have elaborate patterns of work, and graduate students reach heights of ritualistic behavior in the preparation of seminar papers. Findings suggest that teachers should urge students to cultivate productive writing rituals, and should examine their own writing rituals. (Author/ARH)

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ABSTRACT

WRITING RITUALS

Ann B. Dobie

Recognizing that experienced writers often develop elaborate patterns for carrying out the various stages of their work, this study questioned developmental composition students, freshman composition students, honors students, graduate students, and professors about their writing rituals with the purpose of identifying pedgagogical strategies that will facilitate student writing. Questionnaires and personal interviews indicated that developmental students have writing rituals, but they are often unproductive ones. Freshman composition students are more likely to use writing warm-ups, turn to stress relieving activities, and, in general, more consciously control the process of writing. Honors students have elaborate patterns of work, and graduate students reach heights of ritualistic behavior in the preparation of seminar papers. The conclusions drawn from the information collected are that teachers should urge students to cultivate productive writing rituals, personal habits that can be repeated in the same sequence each time they write. It also suggests that as writers, teachers can benefit from an examination of their own writing rituals.

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WRITING RITUALS

During the summer months I have the leisure to give whole days over to a single project. Undistracted by classes to teach, committees to serve, or students to advise, I enjoy the luxury of uninterrupted concentration on a particular writing task. On one such day last August I found myself in late morning still not seated before the computer, though it had been turned on an hour or so before, and I suddenly wondered what I had been doing, since I had been under the impression that I had been working on a paper. Thinking back, I realized that I had made a second pot of coffee, loaded the washing machine, set the house straight, and walked around the yard--twice. In a conscious effort to get started, I filled the coffee cup, turned on the small fan that makes a low hum, put the dictionary on my right, and turned over yesterday's pages so that the text didn't show. I still wasn't working, I thought. Or was I? In some way, each seemingly unrelated act had played a part in the process of writing--at least as I do it. The ritual of beginning, enacted in a similar form each time I start, then gives way to the ritual of composing, and the ritual of revising. To write without such aids, I realized, was not an act I wanted to undertake.

We have all heard the stories about Hemingway's need to sharpen a hundred pencils before he could begin the day's work or Voltaire's habit of stuffing his desk with rotting apples to stimulate his creativity. What implications do such habits have for writing teachers, I wondered. And so I began a piece of research that I hoped would not only produce some interesting information, but also provide some helpful pedagogical insights.

In true scholarly fashion I distributed questionnaires to gather information about the practices of 109 developmental writing students, 42 freshman composition students, 11 honors freshmen, 44 ESL students, 5 graduate students, 4 college professors, and 1 professional novelist. I tabulated results and even drew a few circles that could have grown up to be pie charts and rectangular blocks that promised eventually to be bar graphs. Then I began to talk to people about how they do their writing, and the statistics took on a human aspect. The consequence is that today instead of giving you the statistical breakdown that would verify whatever conclusions I might draw, I have decided instead to tell you about some imaginary writers who typify what the tabulations suggest.

So let me introduce you to two composite freshmen whose comments are those made by the <u>real</u> students who answered my questions. The first, named Dev, is a first time college freshman who, because of low scores on a placement test and poor performance on a timed writing, is enrolled in a basic (developmental) writing class. She has not had much academic success in the past and is not particularly interested in the classes she is now taking. Nevertheless, she has decided that she needs a college degree if she is to get a good job and is convinced that she can do the work if she tries hard enough. Her answers to my questions are short, sometimes even curt. She will respond to my queries, but she has little

CS211265

inclination to find them interesting or potentially valuable for her own information. As with other assignments made by the teacher, she will go though the motions of doing what is requested, but she sees no point in becoming personally involved with it.

Asked about the circumstances in which she does her best writing, she replies: "I usually work at my desk in my room, but if I'm at home I use the kitchen table." Do you like to have other people around? I asked. "No. I need to be alone so I can concentrate, but somebody always seems to be coming in. As I get towards the middle of a paper, I sometimes like to have people around, but most of the time they just make noise." So you like to work in silence? "Not really. Lots of times I turn on my stereo or the radio to have some music to break the silence, but that's usually after I'm really into the paper." How about T.V? "Doesn't work," she said. I like the cartoons, but they make my mind wander. I have this friend, though, that can't write without noise. If she doesn't have rock music on the radio, she just listens to the noises around her. She says that silence drives her insane." I asked Dev to describe herself as she works ."I sit in a hard, straight-back chair that's not very comfortable. Then I can lean over with both elbows on the table or lean back against the wall. Sometimes I lie on my stomach on my bed or couch because they're not comfortable eiher. Once in a while I walk around to help me think. Mostly I just sit there."

I began to think I was getting somewhere when I asked Dev if she had anything to eat or drink while she was writing. She grew noticeably more interested in our conversation, and her answers grew more detailed. "Well," she said, "I normally eat before I start writing. Then while I'm working I have a Pepsi on the rocks and a cigarette. Sometimes I have my pepper cheese dip with chips and a couple cans of coke. A wine cooler and cookies aren't bad. Honey buns and soda help, or peppermints, chocolate, fireball candy or sweettarts. Cherry coke helps keep my energy up. If I'm on a diet, I just have a sugar-free Sunkist and a yogurt. Hotdogs are messy."

Hoping I had found some enthusiasm for the subject, I moved on to ask Dev about the actual process of writing. "What do you do to get ideas?" I asked. "Oh," she said, "mostly I talk to people, maybe the teacher or my grandmother, to see what I should write about. I get friends to give me a few ideas. Then I think about what they said and try to add my ideas. T.V. cartoons and the words to songs are good, too. But if other people don't help, I just think--real hard." About what? "I think about past experiences or start writing about something that I like." Do you feel at ease just sitting in that chair? Or do you tend to move around? "Oh, I move all right. I bite my finger real hard on my thumb, shake my foot up and down, crack my knuckles, or bounce my right leg real fast, tap my fingers, or rub my head. Instead of wiggling my pen, sometimes I bite the top of it off. Well, that's better than grinding my teeth."

And how about avoiding the process of writing? What do you do to put off the moment of getting down to work? I asked. Again Dev warmed to the discussion. "That's easy," she said. "I go to talk to a friend, play basketball, watch T.V., go drinking, or sleep. Once in a while I do my math homework or wash my car. Not often, though.

Sometimes I just eat some more. I have a friend who is real good at putting off writing. She showers, talks on the phone, or helps friends with their personal problems; she complains about school, visits her parents, goes to bars, screams in the courtyard, rides her bike, goes to the park, shops, rides around with her friend. She's really good."

And so I left Dev, feeling that she has some habits that accompany her writing, or perhaps substitute for it, but not at all certain that she has devised productive rituals that will help her find ideas and communicate them. By her own description she does her writing where she is subject to interruptions, but she feels uneasy when confronted with total silence. She chooses a certain degree of physical discomfort in an effort to increase her concentration on the task, but she is easily diverted to other activities, such as eating and drinking. She exhibits symptoms of stress when there is nothing to do but the work itself. Unaware of how to find her own ideas, she goes to other people for help, or, as a last resort, sits in that uncomfortable chair hoping something will come to her. Her answers to my questions about how she manages to postpone carrying out a writing assignment are subtly revealing. Although she claims that her procrastination activities are many and varied, even they, when she lists them, prove to be unimaginative, not much more entertaining than the writing she is seeking to avoid.

My second composite freshman, Fred Comp, although taking the traditional English 101, is not radically dissimilar in his writing habits. He too likes to write in his room, occasionally lounging on the floor and often on the bed. Seeking a relaxed atmosphere, he is more concerned with the ambience in which he writes. The condition of the room matters to him. It must be piled with clothes, papers, and scattered books or, depending on his mood, made neat and tidy. If he is at home, he spreads his work over the kitchen or dining table, preferably where he can look out of a window at trees and flowers. When he can, he moves from the kitchen to the front porch and beyond to let nature's influence enhance his creativity. As he says: "The best writing I've ever done was done outside sitting on a picnic table in the middle of a huge pecan orchard. It was in December and a cool breeze was blowing."

Fred, again like Dev, likes to do his writing when alone, but unlike her, he finds a way to achieve solitude. He chooses the times at which he writes so that he can have the quietude that he needs. The radio is a popular companion, but only as it plays soft music.

When it comes to food and drink, Fred loses his imaginative lead over Dev. Where she could list an impressive menu of possible repasts to have while writing, Fred often has nothing. If he does take refreshment, it runs to water, cokes, or an occasional piece of fruit.

Fred, like Dev, is a master procrastinator. Television is his major device for avoiding the work at hand, but occasionally attacked by guilt, he studies for other courses or cleans his room. The more worthy the endeavor that replaces his writing, the more reasonable it seems to do it instead of the assignment. Fred explains: "The last

big writing assignment I had, I planted a garden till way past dark."

It is in the process of writing that the most significant differences appear. Fred more often begins his work with a "warm up." It may take a physical form such as kicking his feet, swinging his arms, or just lying on a bench to look at the surroundings. As he says: "Before I write, I like to enjoy where I am. Sometimes I look around me at the scenery and think of how lucky I am to be where I am at the time. Sometimes I just 'mess around' to unwind." The warm-up also has a mental component. He often daydreams, visualizes his subject, "rids the mind of all negative thought patterns," or goes into what he calls "a long daze." Another type of warm-up consists of "scribbling a few words and then starting over several times" or taking notes, looking through a thesaurus, or watching the ever-present television while planning the paper.

I asked Fred how he goes about finding ideas once the warm-up turns into serious work. How does he, as he puts it, "probe the inner thoughts of the mind"? Sometimes he uses opinions he has already formed or experiences he has had. (That happy result is made easier by the notes he makes on interesting topics. He mentioned a friend who even takes a tape recorder to bed because he feels his most uninhibited ideas come just before sleep.) Sometimes, he says, "ideas just pop into my head." On less fortunate occasions, however, he has strategies for turning up topics and theses. He reads articles on related topics, makes lists, brainstorms, prepares outlines, thinks about his dreams from the night before, draws his subject, pictures himself in an incident that summarizes the topic, or, finally, goes back to radio and television. Rarely does he seek out other people to originate a subject or an idea, though he may "try one out" on a friend.

Although he claims that the usual nervous habits help him to work, he also makes use of stress relieving activities, such as jogging, bike riding, walking, cleaning up, lifting weights, and playing basketball. He admits to having heard that in an effort to deal with writing anxiety, <u>other</u> students indulge in what are described as "pleasurable acts that make you happy," such as alcohol and sex. Fred says he prefers to "look up key words of my theme in a thesaurus or dictionary." And there is, again, radio and television.

While he is writing, Fred continues to demonstrate that he has more control than Dev does over how he goes about producing a text. No longer limited to a pen or pencil and lined paper, as she is, Fred has discovered the computer. He is pleased with his ability to generate clean copy by word processing. He keeps himself going by talking to himself, or at least by reading aloud what he has written until "it sounds best. If I'm writing about people, I say whatever they say to myself." Noting that "People <u>have caught me</u> talking to myself," he explains that he talks because he gets bored: "I'm used to having someone to talk to all the time. Sometimes I answer myself, but I try to do it quietly." He expresses some anxious concern for a friend who doesn't talk to herself, but sings with the radio while she writes.

Having looked carefully at the writing rituals of Dev and

Fred, certain correspondences between practice and product begin to appear. Fred, the more accomplished novice writer, is more conscious of how he carries out his writing. He makes an effort to exercise more control over the conditions under which he works and over his own attitudes and responses. He has strategies, rudimentary ones, for coping with frustration and blocks.

Does that emerging pattern hold when examining the writing rituals of other groups of students? It does for international students enrolled in ESL classes. Their differences from Dev and Fred are attributable principally to cultural contrasts or personal idiosyncracies. Living mostly in dormitories, they tend to do their work in the library rather than in their rooms. They drink tea and eat seeds, with an occasional Big Mac or Chicken McNuggets thrown in. One says that to find ideas he "stormbrains" himself, and another doesn't talk to himself while writing, but talks to his surroundings--the trees, sticks, dogs, and cats. Another curses himself. In general, however, they too grope for habitual acts that will facilitate their written use of the language, and their instructors report that the more successful among them are those that have devised effective personal rituals that accompany their preparations for writing and the writing itself.

Students in honors sections of freshman English have more elaborate patterns of work, although they can't always say why they do what they do. They favor writing in bed, propping themselves up with pillows and surrounding themselves with reference books, papers, clipboards, dictionaries, and notes. The light must shine over a particular shoulder. The room is preferably a familiar one, though under pressure, a condition some of them deem to be helpful, they claim to be able to write anywhere. Invention takes place while staring into space or while carrying out unrelated physical activities. In either case, however, the writer understands that "during these tasks I am often 'composing.'"

Do the rituals grow more considered and elaborate with more experienced and skillful writers? They do. Those of graduate students in English are highly specific and richly detailed, approaching the level of superstitious observances: a clean desk, the placement of the telephone, the use of a particular coffee mug (only the white one with seven white geese lined up along the side, each one wearing red and purple deck shoes with small red hearts along the edge of the shoes, will do). They write kneeling against the bed with books and papers spread out around them or listening to a WokMan. Their avoidance tactics are imaginative, even bizarre. They grade papers, not holistically, of course, but correcting each mechanical error. They sharpen pencils, an especially creative digression if they work exclusively at a word processor. They shop, spending money they don't have. They make calls to friends across the country they haven't seen in years. They answer questionnaires, like this one. Cooking and cleaning take place at a frenzied rate. And the result of all this seemingly unrelated activity is the seminar paper.

The rituals of professors, though refined by usage into more individualistic as well as more pragmatic actions, are no less rigorously followed. For example, many deem water to be an effective

enhancer of creativity. Shower heuristics are second only to bath heuristics as modes of invention. Perhaps you have noticed how personal grooming improves among your colleagues as major conferences approach.

Composing now seems to be in a transitional stage for professional academic persons, as the computer is requiring them to adapt some time-honored practices. Thus, turning on the computer has replaced sharpening pencils for one. Screen staring has taken the place of wall staring for another. The hum of the computer, say some, is like collaborative writing, prodding them to keep going by diminishing the "aloneness" of writing.

Other professors, having had success with less technological methods of writing, decline to change. They continue to keep journals and make lists. They walk to think, cherish old clipboards, spend a day or two delaying, drink coffee, listen to music. They copy the last paragraph of the previous day's work to begin the next one. Regardless of the habits, new or old, they are all ways of coping with the mysterious act called writing.

A few small lessons about writing (and the teaching of writing) lurk in this study. First, it points out that even fledgling writers develop habitual ways of doing their work. Sensing, at least unconsciously, that standardized procedures make writing easier and perhaps better, they tend to repeat the steps, even if the purpose is unclear and the results bad. Second, it indicates that if rituals are to be effective, each writer must find what works for him or her, although it may seem illogical to someone else. After all, who knows why the white mug with geese in red and purple deck shoes helps? Third, it suggests that those writers who know which rituals are helpful and which are not increase their control over the entire writing process, from invention to editing. Heightened self-awareness gives one the power to make choices that can improve the final product.

Specifically what do these conclusions suggest for teachers? Obviously they indicate that we should urge students to cultivate personal writing rituals. We can begin by giving them the questions that will help them to do so, questions such as: Where do they do their writing? Do they require solitude? silence? What do they need around them to feel more productive? Does physical movement make ideas and words come more easily? Or do they need to stay still, focusing their energies on the writing? How do they make the transition from whatever they have been doing to the act of writing? How do their rituals change with the different stages of the writing process? Do they revise and edit using the same instruments they used to compose? Which heuristic devices are productive for them? How can they make procrastination a positive act? What are their symptoms of writing stress? What can they do to cope with them? The questions are legion, and the answers to them are important because they indicate how writing rituals should be modified, or for some students, established.

As teachers, then, we can make our students aware of the

importance of developing personal habits that can be repeated in the same sequence each time they write, and as writers we can examine our own rituals. I did. Now I walk around the yard three times.